

## A CHE FOO TRAGEDY

By WILLIAM E. S. FALES

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ENVIOUS people sneered when Percy Strathford Grey passed the civil service examinations with high honors and said that it was due to his being a cousin of the Duke of Eastminster. There was an iota of truth in the sneer, as there is in most sneers. The distinguished relative had aided Percy by the confidential hint that the Chinese examination was the easiest of all and that the chief examiner was deaf and egotistic. The student took advantage of the hint and, being ambitious and persevering, had no trouble with the department of red tape. Shortly after the announcement came his appointment as student interpreter to the Tientsin consulate.

Here he arrived in due season and began his official work. This for the first two years consisted in mastering the mandarin or official language. Percy engaged an old Chinese gentleman in reduced circumstances and made the slow progress which marks instruction under such auspices.

He accordingly had recourse to the method employed by student interpreters from time immemorial in the far east and bought a "living dictionary"—that is, he purchased from her grateful parents a Chinese wife, Ni Hu, the lady in question, was a girl of eighteen, well built and strong, as are most of the women of Shantung. Plain from a Chinese point of view, she was attractive and even handsome to a European eye. Her family belonged to the poor middle class, so that she had had the advantage of highly educated surroundings, if not of a high education herself. She was bright, lively and affectionate.

Percy hired a Chinese house and lived the life of a native scholar. His progress was rapid. In three months he had a good colloquial knowledge of the mandarin. At the end of two years he spoke, read and wrote it as fluently as Professor Giles, the eminent authority. In the examination which then occurred he received high praise from the judges, upon whose report he was promoted from student interpreter to vice consul and was assigned to the city and district of Che Foo.

In the latter city he took a pretty house, installed his Chinese wife and lived the happy-go-lucky life of the far east. Five years passed uneventfully. Twice Ni Hu presented him with a pretty babe which inherited his red blond hair and gray eyes and the mother's Mongolian cheek bones. As she was a devoted mother and her admirable infants, their presence did not disturb him in the least. On the contrary, he grew quite fond of them. They were his children by Chinese law, just as Ni Hu was his wife, but by English law neither they nor she bore any relation to him except a meretricious one.

Percy did his best to advance himself at Che Foo. His superior, the consul, had grown gray in the service and did just as little work as possible. He was therefore delighted to have the vice consul perform the duties of the office. By degrees the younger man exercised more and more of the consular functions until he was practically consul in all but name. The reports and dispatches were such models as to attract the attention and win the praise of the

legation at Peking and then of the foreign office in Downing street. At first the credit went to the consul, who seemed to have blossomed out into a second youth. Then as the truth crept out it went in full measure to Grey.

At the end of the five years several events occurred. Percy received a leave of absence for a year, with permission to visit England. With the leave came the notice that on account of his meritorious services he had been promoted to consul. At the same time came the visit of Miss Trevelyan.

This young lady was tall, handsome and a presumptive heiress. She was connected with a dozen great families and was a cousin of the British ambassador at Peking. She had made a visit upon the latter and was now leisurely journeying along the China coast en route to India and thence to London. Letters from the embassy had preceded her on her route, so that at every port she had a triumphal welcome. She had been tried by the dirt and noise of Peking and Tientsin and found Che Foo a veritable paradise, as in fact it is. The best rooms in the consulate were set aside for her, and upon Grey devolved the work of entertaining her. How well he performed the duty was the talk of Che Foo for a year. During her stay her boudoir, the saloon and dining room were floral bowers. Dances, boat parties, regattas, dragon boat races, tennis, golf, sedan chair excursions, amateur dramatics and musicals followed one another swiftly.

The heiress became attached to the young consul, and he in turn saw in



NURSE AND CHILD BECAME INSEPARABLE.

her a superb stepping stone in his diplomatic career. When the day of her departure arrived the two were engaged, and Grey had promised to follow and overtake her by the time she reached Singapore.

The news spread abroad, and Grey was overwhelmed with congratulations. When he returned to the consulate after seeing the steamer depart which bore away Miss Trevelyan he sank in a chair and was lost in a day dream. He saw himself married and a happy father; he saw the aged consul die in whom the Trevelyan estates and the baronetcy of Dorset rested and the fortune and title pass to his infant son; he saw himself secretary of legation and then ambassador at Versailles or St. Petersburg.

The first thing was to clear off all his business and send Ni Hu to her father's with a handsome settlement, as is the custom of the far east. This he did with great alacrity. Though cold and calculating, Grey was not at all mean. He settled on Ni Hu £500, which made her independent for life and which was twice the amount usually given in such cases. He also arranged for the education of the two boys. Ni Hu received the news with singular calmness. Grey had expected and was prepared for a frenzied outbreak, but none came. Despite the seven years of companionship the man had been too much engrossed in himself to become acquainted with her real nature.

The days passed rapidly, and soon Grey was steaming southward on a red funnel boat to overtake Miss Trevelyan. Ni Hu went to her parents' home, where her wealth made her now a conspicuous figure. Ill fortune seemed to have marked her for its own. She was robbed. A branch of the How Qua bank, where most of her money was lodged, failed irretrievably, and the banker hanged himself in orthodox Mongolian style. She wrote several times to Grey, but the letters never reached him. Then she drifted away from Tientsin and was given up for dead.

Grey overtook his fiancée at Singapore and, with her and her party, made the rest of the journey to London.

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Two months afterward they were married, and the society journals gave a column to the affair. The honeymoon was spent on the continent and Christmas and New Year's on the Nile. Then they traveled leisurely to the far east. At Hongkong Grey received notice that he had been assigned to Chinkiang, on the Yangtze river, and thither the couple repaired. A year after their arrival Mrs. Grey became the mother of what the port doctor was pleased to call "the best British babe ever born on the great river." Chinkiang is full of fever and malaria. These had no influence on the babe, which thrived from the first, but they played havoc with the mother and the English nursemaid. The latter fell so sick that she had to be sent home. She was replaced by a poor native woman, Ah Tai, who was employed by a missionary not far from the consulate.

The new nurse was not very attractive. Her face was prematurely old and marred by a recent attack of smallpox. Her eyebrows and lashes and much of her front hair were gone, and the malady had affected her voice, which was harsh and deep. But beneath her unimpressive exterior the woman displayed intelligence, fidelity and skill. The baby took to her, and as the mother grew weak the nurse and child became inseparable. Grey paid little attention to either. What thought he did not give to his office was bestowed on his wife, who was slowly becoming a helpless invalid. He appealed to the ambassador and after much red tape obtained a transfer from Chinkiang to his old post, Che Foo.

Mrs. Grey heard the news with a languid smile. So low was her vitality that the prospect of exchanging dreary and miasmatic Chinkiang for sunny and picturesque Che Foo hardly stirred her heart. Grey noticed her apathy, but said nothing. She had played her part in his life's drama and now was of but secondary importance. Wealth and power were to come to him through the stalwart baby crowing in the garden with the nurse. Within a year or two, according to reports from home, the present baronet would be no more, and then a new career would begin for both the baby and his father.

Preparations for the voyage to the north were soon made. They sailed down the mighty river to Shanghai and waited in that metropolis for a coast steamer to Che Foo. One arrived, and by some coincidence it proved to be the same which had carried both Miss Trevelyan and thereafter Grey from Che Foo to Shanghai. The master, Captain Daniels, gave them a hearty welcome and set aside for them the best cabin in his stately little boat.

The northeast monsoon had just set in, and the voyage up to the Shanghai promontory was rough and depressing. Mrs. Grey kept to her bed, while Grey passed his time with the officers and engineers. The baby and nurse had the saloon to themselves, where the former made merry from dawn until dark. As they passed the promontory and entered the Yellow sea the weather began to change, and the day on which they reached Che Foo saw a clear, warm sky and a smooth sea.

Mrs. Grey was carried out upon the deck and laid, carefully wrapped, in a long chair. Near her in another chair was the nurse with the child. The approaching end of the journey was affecting all of the party. The sick woman had a hectic flush on her cheeks which made her look quite beautiful. The nurse was attired in rich blue silk

and in her hair were the jeweled pins in vogue among the women of Shantung. The baby was resplendent in fine linen. Ere long they saw the blue hills and silver beach of their destination. Grey strolled to the party and said:

"There is my old home and hereafter, I hope, ours." As he spoke the nurse looked up at him a moment and then, lowering her gaze, seemed unconscious of his presence. But in that look there was an expression which would have chilled him to the heart could he have seen it.

The sailors came forward and took down the railing where the companion ladder was to land and also that near the hatch from which the cargo is hoisted. As they walked away to another part of the ship the nurse arose from the chair and with the baby in her arms strolled to a position near the open rail. Then she turned and in a voice which was strange to Mrs. Grey, but familiar to Grey, said sharply: "Hai Kwan, do you remember Ni Hu, your Chinese wife and your two sons, as handsome as this? You sent them



NI HU SPRANG THROUGH THE OPEN RAIL INTO THE SEA.

away to marry this woman and become rich by having this child. Your two sons were killed by the gods with smallpox; Ni Hu was robbed and thrown upon the street to die. She wrote you for money, for help, but you never answered. She had smallpox, but did not die. The gods wanted her to live. I am Ni Hu. My time has come, and I go willingly to meet our boys."

Her last word was ringing in their ears as Ah Tai, or Ni Hu, turned and with the baby in her arms sprang through the open rail into the sea. The consul was about to spring forward when Mrs. Grey with a scream which died into a moaning gasp fell over on the deck. When he picked her up he saw that her heart had ceased to beat.

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